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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in the current social and educational climate. Considerable research has documented the importance of HBCUs in U.S. education. In 1994, the National Center for Education Statistics noted that the 103 HBCUs at that time represented only 3% of the institutions of higher education but produced one-third of all black college graduates. Data from a study by the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education show the perceived importance of HBCUs to African American students and faculty. So that the HBCU educational system continues to be a complement to the U.S. higher education system, the paper makes 13 recommendations to strengthen the position of this vital component of the higher education system. HBCUs should not be dismantled or reengineered to confirm their role in the U.S. higher education system. (SLD)

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HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES: AN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM AT THE CROSSROADS

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Today's 105 Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) face a paradigm shift that will inevitably determine their fate in the 21st century. The role of the HBCU has changed tremendously since Lincoln University in Pennsylvania founded by the Presbyterian Church is 1854 and Wilberforce University in Ohio founded by the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1856 served as a haven for Black students to receive a post-secondary education. These colleges were located in the North prior to the Civil War where educational opportunities were available to Blacks. In fact, Oberlin College also in Ohio was one of the first Traditional White Institutions (TWI) to enroll Black students. In the South, there were restrictions on the education of Blacks, free and slaves, where states had statutes forbidding slaves to learn to read or write. Such restrictions limited the education of Blacks, but allowed the equivalent of an elementary or secondary education only. Obtaining a post-secondary education was limited to the colleges located in the North.

Most HBCUs established before 1890 were private institutions. Public HBCUs were founded in response to the *Second Morrill Act of 1890* (Wenglinsky, 1997, p. 7). This act provided federal funding to states to establish land-grant colleges. The restriction was that states had to provide Blacks with equal access to these colleges or establish separate institutions for Black students. Hence, the term "separate but equal" begins to come into play. Of course, most Southern states chose the latter option and between 1890 and 1899, 17 all-Black public colleges were founded (Wenglinsky, 1997, p. 7).

Other federal legislation has also affected the existence of public HBCUs. *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) stated public educational institutions could be segregated if there was

a degree of fiscal equity. Of course, there remained an inequitable amount of funding being realized by HBCUs. *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954), although focusing on elementary and secondary education, held that segregation caused financial constraints for Black schools and order states to desegregate them. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited federal funds to be used for segregated schools and colleges. The Higher Education Act of 1965 provided financial aid to individual students who could not afford a post-secondary education. Of course, Blacks were disproportionately affected and funds were made as direct grants to HBCUs to reduce financial resource inequities. *Adams v. Richardson* (1973) noted 10 states were still operating segregated systems of higher education and required the further integration of HBCUs and TWIs. The Supreme Court believed the responsibility fell on both institutions and each taking steps to diversify their student bodies and faculties could remedy the problem.

After all this legislation, HBCUs continued to be more diverse institutions than TWIs. In fact, The Carnegie Commission on Higher Education (1971) defined the HBCUs role as assuming leadership for the black community; stimulating the interest of Black youth in higher education; to serve as the custodians for the archives of black Americans; to assume leadership in the development of learning methodologies for overcoming handicaps of the educationally disadvantaged; to develop and expand programs of education and retraining of black adults; and continuing to provide educational opportunities for students who fall short of admission requirements of conventional institutions of higher learning (Frierson, 1993).

Despite all this, the Supreme Court's decision in *U.S. v. Fordice* (1992) "held that the mere lack of formal racial barriers between TWIs and HBCUs in a state was not

sufficient evidence that the state's college system was desegregated" (Wenglinsky, 1997, p. 8). The court went on to say that there were three tests to determine if a system remained segregated. The questions evolved around duplication of resources and programs between the institutions; being ethnically homogenous; and specific educational justification for the two institutions. The court found that the defendant, the state of Mississippi failed to pass the first two tests. Mississippi was ordered to justify or to eliminate the HBCUs. The state raised entrance requirements, which resulted in enrollment declines ranging from 9.9 percent to 20.1 percent at Alcorn State University and Mississippi Valley State University, two of three public HBCUs in the state. While the focus of earlier laws was public HBCUs, private HBCUs were now being impacted by *U.S. v. Fordice*. Private HBCUs depend on federal funding to ensure enrollment and the loss of such funding would have a tremendous impact on enrollment.

To understand the role HBCUs played and continues to play for the U.S. educational system, one only needs to understand their impact to date. "Of the 1.4 million African Americans in college, 16.4% attend HBCUs" (Taylor & Olswang, 1999, p. 2). The National Center for Education Statistics noted in 1994 that there were 103 HBCUs representing only 3 percent of the 3,688 institutions of higher education and produce one-third of all Black college graduates (Schexnider, 1998). There were 40 public, four-year colleges; 10 public, two-year colleges; 49 private, four-year colleges, and 4 private, two-year colleges. Today, 105 exist with a public and a private two-year college being added.

Disagreement over the mission and value of HBCUs is not a new policy issue even among noted Black leaders. W.E. DuBois held the position that HBCUs should emphasize their unique ability to educate and prepare Black students to become

community leaders. Booker T. Washington's view was different in that he believed HBCUs should emphasize the sciences and engineering, encouraging Black students to start careers in these professions. There is some merit to both arguments if we examine the results of The Carnegie Commission on Higher Education as previously discussed.

From the students' perception, HBCU received higher ratings in their perceptions of General Education and Personal Growth than non-HBCU students (McLure, Rao, Lester, 1999). The aspirations of HBCU students compared to non-HBCU students were also higher in regards to their highest lifetime goal when first enrolled in college being a doctorate or professional level degree, 36.7% to 17.3% (McClue, Rao, Lester, 1999).

Another factor to consider here is the perceptions of African American educators toward HBCUs. They perceived the advantages of attending a HBCU included: the chance to identify and relate to positive role models; being the dominant group at HBCUs seems to give greater self esteem and a strong desire for students to excel; getting to know the African-American learning process and appreciating its uniqueness; opportunity to be in a setting that is generally perceived to be more supportive of students of color; maintenance and development of self identify, forming a bond of comradeship; and the opportunity to learn in a positive cultural environment (Frierson, 1993).

One last point to note is that recent reports on college enrollment and degree completion experiences of African American students have largely ignored the contributions of HBCUs (Redd, 2000). Such research has been limited to those who attend TWI through diversity or affirmative action programs. Utilizing data from the second follow-up of the U.S. Department of Education's 1993 Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study (B&B) to compare post-college activities four years later of 1993

graduates provides some interesting results. While there were some differences between Black males and females graduates, HBCU graduates were more likely than non-HBCU graduates to participate in community service. About 57 percent Black males and 54 percent Black females versus 37% and 50% of those from non-HBCU institutions performed community service.

The study results also validated the continued importance of HBCUs in contributing to the success of African Americans. Past experience of policy makers were to assume that Blacks were successful after college if educated at TWIs. The B&B data revealed that Black graduates, especially males, can do just as well in employment and other areas as graduates from non-HBCU institutions (Reed, 2000, p. 4).

The question before us now is how to address HBCUs: An Educational System at the Crossroads. Given the data presented so far in this paper, I believe there is still a crucial role for HBCUs in the nation's educational system. Like most businesses when forced to look at market competition and changes in the economy, HBCUs must do some reengineering of their own and this does not mean moving beyond their mission that has brought them thus far. HBCUs are faced with the same problems plaguing our educational system today – increasing costs, legislative oversight, accreditation pressures, part-time faculty, et cetera (Schexnider, 1998). Due to the unique history, there are other obstacles that must be addressed, mainly one of desegregation. HBCUs must therefore, continually reexamine themselves and their value to our higher education system.

Meharry Medical College, one of the four Black medical schools of the 105 HBCUs has embraced a strategic philosophy based on partnership- and nice-focused strategies where excellence is the norm, sound business models are standard, and

sophisticated and effective management processes are essential to the success of the institution (Howland, 2001). Meharry is the largest private Black health sciences institution in the nation founded 125 years ago. On the brink of closure in 1994, the college has rebounded and is currently in a $125-million capital campaign, having raised over $50 million. In 1999, Meharry ranked No. 1 in graduating African American medical students

Lincoln University, a HBCU founded in 1866, has taken a critical look at the effects and implications of mission refinement and desegregation efforts. Researchers studied a 15 year period, 1983 to 1998, when the university had the unique challenge of maintaining an identity as an HBCU while also emphasizing the need to further integrate its student body amid the state of Missouri higher education desegregation efforts (Nazeri & Nazeri, 2000, p. 3).

Researchers collected, reviewed, and analyzed data related to the influence of geography on student enrollment, tuition cost analysis, and historical enrollment data by race from TWIs in Missouri. The data was further analyzed in relation to Lincoln University's evolving Statement of Mission with close attention given to changes made between the 15 years under review. The initial Statement of Mission in the 19th century stated "the institution was designed to meet the education and social needs of freed African-Americans" (Nazeri & Nazeri, 2000, p. 4). During the 1980s, the statement was refined and now includes "the University will continue to offer comprehensive service to a diverse body of traditional and non-traditional students with a broad range of academic preparation and skills" (Nazeri & Nazeri, 2000, p. 4). To also counter a stand by the state to end the University's historic mission and land grant status, the Board of Curators

reaffirmed the Statement of Mission in 1987 with the following: "To serve as a resource center for minority affairs and other areas consistent with faculty and staff expertise. To meet the educational needs of a statewide, multicultural clientele as well as those of other students" (Nazeri & Nazeri, 2000, p. 4).

For the period in question, Lincoln's student mix has changed tremendously. In 1983, Black Non-Hispanic students comprised 50 percent of the total student enrollment compared to 39 percent for Whites. By 1998, this composition had changed dramatically, Black Non-Hispanic student enrollment dropped to 27 percent while White student enrollment soared to 66 percent of the total student population. The researchers note that the Statement of Mission served as the catalyst for achieving racial diversity.

These are only two examples of how HBCUs are dealing with the issues facing their existence today. Recent research indicates there remains a unique role for HBCUs to play in our nation's higher education system. One report indicated that the primary educational justification for the survival of HBCUs is they are more successful than TWIs in preparing Black students for careers in engineering, science, or business (Wenglinsky, 1997, p. 3). These are areas where Blacks are disproportionately represented. The report also noted that while Black students at HBCUs were no more likely than Black students at TWIs to aspire to become community leaders, they were more likely to aspire to a post-baccalaureate degree (Wenglinsky, 1997, p. 3).

I conclude that the HBCU educational system is a complement to our nation's higher educational system and should remain in tact with certain refinements to ensure their unique place in history. From my research undertaken for this paper, I suggest the

following 13 factors for consideration by HBCUs to foster their continued value to our higher education system:

1. HBCUs should become resource center for issues dealing with African American studies, heritage, and culture. In essence, centralized repositories of information.

2. HBCUs can play a vital role in the public health arena by conducting research, providing care, and educating African Americans about diseases that disproportionately them.

3. HBCUs may enter into partnership agreements such as the alliance between Meharry Medical College and Vanderbilt University Medical Center. This alliance offers both institutions the opportunity to utilize their strengths in primary care and specialty care medicine while collaborating on educational and research initiatives to capitalize on the uniqueness of each institution to better enhance the teaching and learning offered to students, faculty, staff, and the community.

4. HBCUs must continue to serve as a beacon of hope for future African American leaders by being role models, offering a supportive learning environment, and offering cultural experiences that impact student lives.

5. HBCUs must conduct empirical research, especially on their effectiveness, that will stand up against peer reviews.

6. HBCUs must continually refine their mission statements to reflect changes brought on by federal and state legislation. This does not mean HBCUs will lose their identify. It does ensure there is a process of reexamining the mission statement to counter attacks to their very existence.

7. HBCUs should continue to develop alternative programs to overcome handicaps of those educationally disadvantaged to succeed on a post-secondary level.

8. HBCUs must continue to be community leaders in the African American community by conducting outreach programs of technical assistance, education, and consultation.

9. HBCUs must continue to diversify their student population and faculties to counter any attacks to further desegregate their institutions.

10. HBCUs must publish more of their research efforts in appropriate professional and peer reviewed journals.

11. HBCUs must ensure that those students entering professions that require licensure of some type are prepared to pass standardize testing procedures. In essence, HBCUs must ensure their curriculums are consistent with the methodology of teaching for the boards.

12. HBCUs should continue to attain accreditation from the appropriate accrediting bodies.

13. HBCUs can play a pivotal role in community and economic development since many are located in urban areas in need of revitalization.

Of course, I do not claim to be an educational policy expert by taking one course that deals with multicultural education. I can, however, offer insights as someone who has worked in higher education at a HBCU and a prestigious TWI, Meharry Medical College and Vanderbilt University respectfully. HBCUs play a very significant role in the education of African American leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Thurgood

Marshall, Andrew Young, Jr., Nikki Giovanni, Oprah Winfrey, Douglas Wilder, Louis Sullivan, Jr., Toni Morrison, Jessye Norman, Rosa Parks, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. DuBois, Phylicia Rashad, just to name a few.

The evolution of the HBCU has changed dramatically from its initial existence of a place of education for the Negro, freed or slave, to avoid their enrollment at a TWI. I called this the beginning of the "separate but equal" syndrome. As our nation started to give more attention to civil rights, HBCUs came under attack that their system of education was no longer needed since TWIs had opened their campuses to all races because of state and federal intervention.

Now is not the time for HBCUs to rely on their gut feelings that they are making a difference. They must arm themselves with research that supports their uniqueness and impact on today's educational system. In terms of post-secondary education, "HBCU bachelor's degree recipients account for 75 percent of black Americans of all ages holding doctoral degrees" (Historically Black Colleges and Universities for the 21st Century: Annual report of the President's Board of Advisors on Historically Black Colleges and Universities, 1999, p. 20). According to this report, HBCUs now enroll only 18 percent of all Black college students in the United States but award 40 percent of the bachelor's degrees received by Black students nationally. If we are looking at outcome, these statistics should validate the reasoning behind the continued existence of the current 105 HBCUs.

By no means am I suggesting that HBCUs should be content, they need to strategically move forward and conduct ongoing organizational assessments to maintain a clear pulse on their mission.

One final comment, I suggest HBCUs get the word out about their innovative programs to enhance the teaching and learning process. While employed at Meharry Medical College in 1994, our student pass rate on Part 1 of the United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) was only 52% for first time takers. Recognizing this must change, an outside consultant suggested changes in the curriculum, which meant teaching for the boards. Faculty members and certain administrators were adamant that this change in the curriculum not be instituted. After all, they were responsible for teaching these students and the curriculum was sound and consistent, so they thought, with other medical schools. This consultant's work also lead to a very innovative and successful project called Peer-Tutor, which was funded by the Charles E. Culpepper Foundation. Being the writer of this grant, I was very familiar with its purpose. The Teaching and Learning Resource Center (TLRC) was responsible for implementing this program. The TLRC selected students who failed the USLME the first time as peer tutors. After training sessions on study skills, test taking, and lesson tutorials, these students were posed to be peer tutors. Test scores started climbing and in 2000, the college's pass rate was higher than the national average, over 95% for first time test takers.

Such pedagogy must be published in the field to not only increase the body of knowledge in the subject area but also provide additional validity and credibility to the existence of HBCUs today.

Unlike TWIs, HBCUs have a history of non-racial admissions policies and have educated significant numbers of women, Whites, nonresident aliens, and other minorities while employing a racially mixed faculty and administration (Taylor & Olswang, 1999).

Therefore, Historically Black Colleges and Universities: An Educational System at the Crossroads should not be dismantled yet reengineered like most institutions to confirm their role in our nation's higher educational system. I believe there continues to be a place for HBCUs very existence that not only provides hope, educates, and nurtures, but also remains true to their original mission as obstacles such as desegregation continue to be educational policy issues threatening their existence.

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